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SUBJECT: CROATIAN ISLAMIC COMMUNITY MARKS 90 YEARS OF OFFICIAL
RECOGNITION

¶1. SUMMARY AND COMMENT: At a November 29 commemoration, Croatia's top political leadership paid tribute to the local Islamic community as an active and constructive participant in civil society, and acknowledged the importance of promoting tolerance and religious pluralism in Croatia. The President, Deputy Prime Minister, Parliament Speaker and a host of dignitaries attended, as did several Islamic Ambassadors and U.S. Charge d'Affaires. Even the head of the right-wing Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) pointed proudly to the party's introduction of the 1916 parliamentary resolution calling for legal recognition of the Islamic religion, and noted that the city of Osijek was moving forward with plans to build a mosque there. The high-level attendance (particularly by President Mesic) ensured positive press coverage of the central message of religious freedom and tolerance. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶2. Mufti Sevko Omerbasic led a November 29 ceremony to mark the 90th anniversary of the recognition of Islam in Croatia and the 70th anniversary of the first mosque at Zagreb's Islamic Center. Also in attendance were Reis-Ul-Ulema Mustafa Ceric from Sarajevo, Croatian President Stjepan Mesic, Parliament Speaker Vladimir Seks, Deputy Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor, Party of Rights (HSP) president Anto Djapic, Zagreb Mayor Milan Bandic, prominent Islamic figures from Croatia and neighboring countries, representatives of other religious communities and of the diplomatic corps.

¶3. Omerbasic recalled that on 27 April 1916 the Croatian parliament, on the initiative of Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) MPs, passed a law recognizing Islam as an official religion in Croatia (part of Austria-Hungary at the time), Noting that Croatia had 204 Muslims then, Omerbasic reported that currently, according to official figures, the Muslim population numbers 56,777; in addition, Islam is taught in schools and Muslims have an active presence in Croatia's politics, economy, science, military, sports and the arts.

¶4. Reis-Ul-Ulema Ceric said the Islamic community had become a free and responsible entity in Croatia which enjoyed full rights and that it could serve as an example on which European governments could learn how to address Muslim needs. He noted that the Pope's current visit to Turkey gave hope that some closed doors between the East and the West would finally open and that those doors which let in mistrust would close. He asked that Europe's Muslims help the Vatican restore its reputation as a leader in inter-religious dialogue.

¶5. Croatian President Mesic said the Islamic community was an active and constructive factor in inter-religious and social dialogue in Croatia. He asserted that the 1916 recognition of Islam as an official religion in Croatia proved that Croatians, despite centuries of inter-religious conflict, understand the importance of a society based on dialogue and coexistence. Parliament Speaker Seks echoed these sentiments, asserting that modern Europe must be built on religious pluralism founded on tolerance and inter-religious dialogue. MP and leader of the right-wing Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) Ante Djapic referred to the HSP's role in 1916, and in his capacity as mayor of Osijek (Croatia's fourth largest city), reported that Osijek would facilitate construction of a mosque there. (NOTE: Djapic was invited because of the HSP's 1916 role.) Zagreb Mayor Bandic was also present, because the city had allocated substantial funding to restore the mihrab -- the central

stone equivalent to an altar -- from the old mosque (which was turned into a museum after WW2).

¶6. Numbering fewer than 60,000 moderate and well-integrated Moslems (many of Bosnian origin), the Community's concerns center largely on serving its members; in addition to maintaining the mosque and a secondary school in Zagreb, longstanding plans to build a second mosque in Rijeka appear close to realization. As noted, a third mosque is planned for the city of Osijek. In February 2006, the Muslim community in Zagreb hosted Bosnian Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric, who presented a Declaration of European Muslims which received considerable media attention; it invited Muslims to accept European democratic standards, and appealed to EU countries to officially recognize Islam in order to make it less vulnerable to external influences. Croatian Mufti Omerbasic noted at the time that that Croatia was one of four countries in Europe that officially recognizes Islam and in which the indigenous Muslim community was successfully integrated into society.

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